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ABSTRACT

This booklet examines folk tales and fairy stories derived from folk wisdom from the standpoint that they are not an escape from reality, but that they help people deal with the reality that technology cannot explain. The book focuses on the pros and cons of folk and fairy tales and on their nature and function. It also presents an analysis of a contemporary fairy tale. The book concludes with a discussion of why, when, and how to tell fairy tales and a bibliography of books for children of all ages. (HTH)

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Functions of Folk and Fairy Tales

By Donald Baker

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Editorial Assistants

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Introduction

We live in a century whose science and technology have put men on the moon and discovered silicon chips that can almost do our thinking for us. Yet we seem unable to exist on this planet without quarrels and wars. We have freezers to store our food, but a climate approaching absolute *zero* in human relationships. In short, though we may penetrate the mysteries of the universe, we have by no means grasped the secret of living. And we still question the purpose of life itself. When Shakespeare made King Lear desperately ask, "Who can tell me who I am?" he gave voice to the cosmic riddle. And verifiable facts and figures do not seem to help.

Admittedly, scientists can define a human being in biological terms and quantify the elements that make up the body. Psychologists give us clues about the workings of the mind. Yet somehow we sense that these explanations are incomplete. Biologists and psychologists describe our behaviour*—the chemical changes that take place when we are angry or happy—but tell us little or nothing about the origin of evil or the beginnings of conscious life.

Because science apparently offers factual answers to life on earth and even among the stars, our educational systems have been geared to a world of technology. There is a definite trend to design and develop curricula capable of preparing children for the life they will presumably lead in a technologically based society. The actual value of that technology and the quality of life it supports—in fact, the morality of extracting from the earth all that we need without concern for what we are putting back—are issues we either ignore or do not give nearly as much thought as they deserve or demand. We merely cry out when the oil dries up, not realising that we are responsible for the drought. How to live *with* nature not *off* it is a matter of morals, not only of conservation. Reality and relevance, interpreted as factual information, characterise much of our educational theory and practice; hence, it is argued, children should be confronted with real problems, real people and real places. Stories must be set in the contemporary world; otherwise, they will not be true. Fantasy is out, and facts are in!

But folk tales, and the fairy stories derived from them, demonstrate another aspect of truth, that of experience which is really a form of faith. It cannot be verified with facts, though for an individual it is nonetheless true for that. In *The Uses of Enchantment* (1977) Bruno Bettelheim remarks:

> *Before a child can come to grips with reality, he must have some frame of reference to evaluate it (p. 117).*

Every child wants a story that answers his or her psychic needs, whether it is factually true or not. In any case, a very young child has

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no means of assessing the evidence. Similarly, a society must satisfy the perplexing experiences of its collective psyche regarding its origins, morals and mores. The folk tale provides some of these answers.

Folk and fairy tales evolved to meet various psychological needs. They lie at the roots of every culture and, despite geographical differences, have curious similarities in theme. Whether told round the tribal fire, at the family hearth or sung as a lullaby to send a baby into the land of dreams and fantasy, secure within parental and social protection, the folk tale and fairy story still have fundamental functions even in the 20th century. They are not escapes from reality; they help us to deal with it.

To deny fantasy and the capacity to dream with purpose is to destroy the gift of mental and emotional healing with which every story is endowed. Whenever we hear or read those magic words, "Once upon a time . . . ," we are projected into a world from which we return, equipped and healed, informed, wiser and more able to cope with the perplexed and perplexing world of everyday life. J. R. R. Tolkien (1964), creator of The Hobbit and master of the modern fairy tale, describes this process as one of "Escape, Recovery and Consolation." Folk and fairy tales should be at the centre of our education in school and home, for they are the source of our beliefs about humanity.

Donald Baker

**Editor's note:* British spelling and terminology have been retained to preserve the international flavor of the text.

Folk and Fairy Tales: The Pros and Cons

One fact is certain: fairy tales are not necessarily about gossamer-winged, golden-haired goody-goodies flitting from one flower petal to another. Indeed, just the opposite is true! Most traditional and contemporary tales are horrific and frightening, one of the two main reasons why fairy tales are criticised by parents and teachers alike. The second reason is obvious when we remember that "fairy tale" has become synonymous with fantasy or telling lies. Nevertheless, for those educators and parents who believe in what is vaguely described as "realism," fantasy in any form is an anathema. Children, they urge, should not be insulated from the "real" world which confronts them in the form of doctors, dentists or the death of parent or pet. On the other hand, there are those who claim that children should not have to experience the horror, physical violence and supernatural events that are the basic ingredients of a fairy tale.

Despite Walt Disney and his famous animated cartoon movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (a tale that has been told for centuries in many languages), *Grimm's Fairy Tales* appear to be aptly named. They are undoubtedly "grim," and no wonder! Most are narratives derived from folk tales of central Europe, where they had a totally different function from that of the less terrifying tales told at bedtime. The folk tale serves a very different purpose from the purely escapist entertainment associated, quite erroneously, with the fairy story. Shakespeare's fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are not the wand-waving, white-clad figures floating playfully amongst the trees of a friendly forest. As a recent production of the play showed, the Elizabethans possibly regarded fairies as grotesque, playful perhaps, but also quite capable of trickery and cunning.

Although the songs from *Snow White* remain in our whistling repertoire (and lovable though the dwarfs may be), the "wicked queen," whom many have adversely criticised, has caused a general condemnation of the whole corpus of fairy tales. Walt Disney, however, did a service by reminding us that witches are sometimes evil and ugly and, incidentally, revealed the subconscious function of fairy tales in general. The context in which the story is seen or read is also significant to the effect of the traditional fairy story and the folk tale from which it is often derived. When it is read by a parent at bedtime, by a teacher during class, or by a leader at a gathering round the tribal fire, a communal security is established and maintained. It is this security which provides the framework for relating the fundamental issues of evil and goodness, death and life,

and the tasks and journeys that symbolise life itself. What is frightening to an individual can be a lesson of life to the family or classroom group. We shall return to this point later.

Fairy tales like those of the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen, two of the best-known collections, undoubtedly include terrifying elements which, paradoxically, are also potentially therapeutic. In a story dealing with fear, like the "Man who was unable to shiver or shudder," the intention is to uncover hidden repressions and to show that to feel fear is normal and truly human. It implies respect for others, borne not of fear of them but of a healthy recognition of their claims upon us. The growing child must recognise the rights of others, just as he or she makes a claim on parents for protection and well-being. Fairy tales are not escapist fantasies; nor do they induce anxiety states. In either case they perform the opposite function; namely, to confront children with the reality of their subconscious terrors and nightmares in the guise of a tale told in secure surroundings. These issues are plain in the modern version of a fairy tale created by the cult figure of Tolkien and his Hobbits. *The Lord of the Rings* has been criticised for precisely the same reasons of perpetrating violence and terror as earlier and traditional fairy tales which, it is claimed, are at best pure fantasy and at worst provokers of unnecessary phobias and fears.

Far from being escapist, however, folk and fairy tales are means of coming to terms with the world as it is—of confronting reality, not running away from it into a "never-never" land where Peter Pan lives a life of arrested child development. Indeed, both folk tale and fairy story are aspects of fantasy which both children and adults alike must experience if they are going to live satisfactorily in a land not made of candy floss and rock candy mountains. Yet the fairy tale—though often beginning with scenes a child can recognise as having some similarity with his or her own limited but widening experience (a house, a castle, a forest, a seashore)—usually leaves the factual reality behind and moves into a fantasy or imaginary world of talking animals, beanstalks of phenomenal growth, ogres, witches and gingerbread houses where children are fattened up for food. The fairy tale, however, is not concerned with the kind of reality of which we are daily aware; its function is to reveal the inner world of half-comprehended thoughts, concepts and imaginings. Without the fairy tale we should never achieve any kind of humanity. As Bruno Bettelheim (1977), whose work on the psychology of fairy tales should be standard reading, observes:

> *In a fairy tale the internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events. . . . The unrealistic nature of these tales (which narrow-minded rationalists object to) is an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tales' concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in an individual (p. 25).*

Folk and fairy stories fulfill this function for individuals; for society, they help to regulate its activities, interpret its values, and record its history and customs. Fairy stories and folk tales are frequently complementary; their mode of telling is fundamental to the success of their function and meaning. In the case of very young children, the fairy tale assumes even greater significance by helping them confront and ideally to solve the emotional problems involved in growing up and growing away from their parents as they gain independence. At the same time, children need the security of family and social life; the folk and fairy tale can provide this sense of security by distancing the problem in a narrative set in a fantasy world where happy endings encourage hope for the future. First, however, we need to examine the nature and function of folk and fairy tales. We shall then go on to analyse a contemporary tale, and finally we shall discuss some of the ways of presenting stories to young children and the role of the storyteller.

The Nature and Function of Folk and Fairy Tales

Folk tales, like the fairy stories derived from them, have a variety of functions though a limited number of themes. Indeed, they vividly illustrate Jung's familiar notion of the archetype (1971); the appeal of fairy tales seems mainly to lie in the archetypal patterns of people and problems they present. For instance, there is usually a hero who, to quote the title of Joseph Campbell's book on the subject (1969), "has a thousand faces," simply because the hero is an archetypal figure with whom a child or adult can identify. Incidentally, the sexist attack on heroes characterised by kings and princes is not supported by the work of psychologists like Bettelheim, who points out that the very nature of the fairy story enables us to identify or "empathise" with the *thematic* not the *literal meaning* of the tale. We mould the meaning to suit the needs associated with our own sex. Fairy tales do not deal with sexual stereotyping, but represent complementary behavioural attitudes within us all. As Bettelheim comments:

While some literal-minded parents do not realize it, children know that, whatever the sex of the hero, the story pertains to their own problems (p. 226).

A hero, like Beowulf or Odysseus, is sometimes regarded as the founder of a people. The actual hero has tenuous history, and much detail is added in the form of courageous and superhuman deeds to the half-historical character who assumes legendary proportions. King Arthur is an obvious British example. When this type of story is rejected by what I would call the "factualists," they are rejecting

not only their own heritage, which is inevitably blurred by time, but also the psychological means of coping with a perplexing world. Family jokes and memories of vacations long past form a major part of the personal heritage we pass on to our children, generating cohesion and continuity within the family circle.

The same principle applies to a social unit or tribe. The legendary Hiawatha, immortalised in Longfellow's poem, is more than a story of the young Sioux warrior who grows up, marries, leaves home and ultimately dies. The whole story, like that of most folk tales, is a metaphor of life itself. The levels of meaning, the allegory implicit in the narrative structure, are there for the taking. Curiously enough, children seem to respond to these different levels without difficulty.

Perhaps because of our compartmentalised thinking—the Western world's obsession with classifying and distinguishing between mind and matter, spirit and body (notions totally alien to Africa, the Orient and the American Indian)—we doubt the efficacy or usefulness of folk and fairy tales. A very young child is perfectly capable of holding a number of apparently contradictory concepts within the mind at one time, and regards them as equally true and valid. Thus, there is no logical contradiction; nor is there moral trespass when a child tells us that lions are in the yard or elephants in the basement! The imaginary playmate, the projection of a child's wish to share his or her thoughts and feelings with someone who inhabits the fantasy (or is it the fairy tale?) world is another example of the way children invent for their own developmental benefit a sounding board for themselves. It is their own personal allegory complete with its private mythology, strict rules and definite boundaries. Consequently, an adult is not always allowed to enter that world.

The Structure of Folk and Fairy Tales

The boundaries between fantasy and reality in fairy tales are defined by form as well as content. Indeed, the allegory of the folk tale is reinforced by the structure (usually a problem to solve, tasks to perform, a journey to be undertaken). Often the narrative involves the healing of a sick king, queen or princess. Evil has to be overcome by faithful service, and there is little doubt that the folk tale represents the psychological need for societies and individuals to engage in certain initiatory rites as they pass from one status to another. The journey in the story is an allegory of everyone's journey through life, a kind of "pilgrim's progress," so that the true folk tale has relevance not only to individuals but to the society in which those individuals live. Every culture has its own obligations and means of movement between one category and another. Academic graduation ceremonies are clear examples of initiation

rites since, at least in Britain, undergraduates are "admitted" to a degree.

The Wizard of Oz is plainly based on the folk structure, the "yellow brick road" representing the journey and the archetypal characters symbolising the various stages through which we all have to pass on our way from birth to death. The main concern is the means by which the passing is effected or, in anthropological terms, the "rites of passage" defined by the tasks performed.

Fantasy worlds in general and fairy tales in particular are also defined verbally and visually. The classic opening words "Once upon a time . . ." immediately set the world of the fairy tale apart from that of the everyday, though the younger the audience the more likely they are to see no point in differentiating—an issue we return to later. The "once-upon-a-timeliness" is frequently defined spatially by the substance of the story. For example, *Alice in Wonderland* invites the reader or listener down a rabbit hole, which clearly represents entry into the other world of fantasy. C.S. Lewis' "Narnia" series, with its best-known example *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* begins with the reader passing through the back of a cupboard (closet). And even the opening of the book itself, or of any book for that matter, is a visual cue that we are embarking on a journey where time and place and people can be manipulated at will.

The world of the folk and fairy tale is one where real time is suspended, and we accept that it should be so; but it is also a world where we are invited to enter and where, in fantasy, we can work out our problems and anxieties. In the fairy tale world there is always consolation in the happy ending. Though it may not be factually true, the psychological effect of healing our emotional wounds is a major function of the fairy tale. We are reassured at the end, and the "good feelings" we experience compensate for the sadness and perplexity we had before the story began.

A further point about structure concerns the use of the number "three." Many traditional tales have three characters, three incidents, three tasks, etc. The reason seems to be that "three" is the basic family unit with father, mother and child. As Bettelheim notes:

> *When in a fairy story a child is the third one, the hearer easily identifies with him because within the most basic family constellation the child is the third down, irrespective of whether he is the oldest, middle, or youngest among his siblings (p. 106).*

Bettelheim suggests that the "third" son or daughter, appearing as a recurrent figure in fairy tales, means the child is at the beginning a simpleton, incompetent or lazy in comparison with the other two—namely, his parents. Only in growing up does the child become their equal. Cinderella is abused by her two stepsisters; and the third of *The Three Little Pigs* is considered stupid to spend so much time building his impregnable house, until he appears as the wisest of them all!

A final point about the use of the three incidents is that of repetition. Children and adults feel secure in the predictability of a story. It acts like a refrain as each incident is introduced in the same way. The series "The first son . . . ," "The second son . . ." and "The third son . . ." reinforces the meaning but also provides us with a sense of recognition. The structure of folk and fairy tales underpins the allegory, reflects a child's inner tensions, and offers a gratuitous feeling of security in knowing what happens next in the liturgical language of repetition in which the traditional folk tale is usually told.

At this point, it is worth making brief comment on the transformation of folk tales into fairy tales and the relationship of these traditional tales to contemporary and "invented" stories. The Brothers Grimm were philologists who collected their tales in the course of researching language. Consequently, they made no pretensions to being tellers of tales for children. Indeed, the violent and terrifying nature of many of their stories leads to adverse criticism of the fairy tale as suitable consumption by children. *Hansel and Gretel,* for instance, may bear marks of primitive infant sacrifice, though the story may be another example of a child's search for independence from what the child regards as overbearing and domineering parents.

Hans Christian Andersen, perhaps the other best-known teller of fairy tales, tended to give traditional tales a romantic and adult flavour. He was communicating more of his individual response to life than the collective experience that characterises the true folk tale turned into fairy story. Andersen's work became a model for many "original" fairy tales; we can trace their influence on such writers as C.S. Lewis and his *The Chronicles of Narnia,* whereas there is more of the Brothers Grimm and an academic's study of Norse mythology informing the substance of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings.*

Perhaps there is no truly original or invented fairy tale; even when we have an identifiable "author," he or she is drawing on tradition for content and structure while at the same time giving the story a contemporary veneer. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* illustrate this clearly. The search for the "ring" and the adventures of Bilbo Baggins are liberally sprinkled with characters derived from Norse mythology and Arthurian romance—confirming the necessity for this kind of story which, though fantastic, reaches into the depths of our subconscious where latent longings, hopes, fears, anxieties and problems of learning to live in a perplexing and perplexed world reside. In fact, and paradoxically, we live more by mystery and dream, myth and risky faith in the future than we do by logic, reason and explanations with which we are never really satisfied. Indeed, myth lies behind much of human experience and precedes or parallels the generation of the folk tale.

Myth and Folk Tales

If we use the term "myth" as the cultural matrix from which folk tales originate, then the following assertion by anthropologist Malinowski (1954) on its function in society is particularly relevant—for it applies not only to the work of Tolkien but also to any folk tale and, as I hope we shall soon recognise, to fairy tales which are folk tales in disguise. *Myth,* says Malinowski,

> *fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation of an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic character of primitive faith and moral wisdom (p. 101).*

Overlooking the unfortunate connotations of Malinowski's word "primitive" and applying these comments on myth to every social group, we have a comprehensive catalogue of mythological functions, of which ritual is the acted and folk and fairy tales are the oral and literary expressions. Any anthropologist regards myth as central to human experience; but more importantly our attitude towards the function of myth in general determines our attitude towards fact and fantasy, truth and fiction in particular. What emerges from any discussion about myth, folk tales and fairy stories is that we should recognise two kinds of truth, whether the philosophers agree with us or not: (1) the factual kind that can be verified by experiment (though even verification may be suspect, since whoever conducts the experiment has to allow for some human error in observation and interpretation) and (2) the truth of experience, the intuitive feeling aroused when we contemplate some distant event or try to empathise with another human being.

For instance, we know that Columbus proved the earth was round empirically, by experimenting and taking a risk when he sailed westward in an act of faith. But what was actually said by the sailors on board ship when they eventually sighted land is anyone's guess. Working this theme out in a piece of improvised drama, one child commented, "Good old Cap'n Columbus. So the world is round after all." Whether anyone on the Santa Maria actually made that comment is immaterial: it was an experiential truth relating to and complementing the fact. This is the function of myth, legend, folk and fairy tale; namely, to recall and relive the past as if it were continually present. (Since the problem it seeks to resolve is an integral part of all human experience, it undoubtedly is!) The mythologist Mircea Eliade (1960) makes this pertinent comment on myth, which is equally relevant to folk and fairy tales:

> *One is always contemporary with a myth, during the time when one repeats it or imitates the gestures of the mythic personages (p. 30).*

So whenever we recount the story of *Snow White, The Wizard of Oz, Cinderella* or *The Three Little Pigs,* those fictitious characters are

reborn in our imagination—meeting those deep-seated psychic needs which the original stories, some now lost in "the dark, backward abysm of time," were collectively generated to meet.

The Psychology of Fantasy, Folk and Fairy Tales

If these are general functions of fantasy manifest in the myth and the folk and fairy tale, we can now become more psychologically specific. Fantasy, crystalised into stories, claims Bettelheim,

fills the huge gaps in a child's understanding which are due to the immaturity of his thinking and his lack of pertinent information (p. 61).

This particular function of fantasy is reiterated by British psychologist D.W. Winnicott (1974), who observes that play, which for our purpose we can regard as synonymous with fantasy, occurs in the inevitable gap opened up between infant and parent with a child's increasing independence. Winnicott terms the objects and events of play "transitional phenomena" by which a child seeks assimilation of the new experiences he or she only dimly comprehends. Lacking the ability to rationalise, the child allows the imagination to take over—producing and subsequently projecting onto and into various objects his or her own hopes and fears, griefs and joys, desires, loves and hates. All these phenomena become the stuff of fantasy, the content and intent of the fairy tale.

Similarly, we can be precise about some folk tales, which seek in their own way to bridge the gap between a community's past and its present or between its means of livelihood (which may be its staple food) and the natural world on which it depends for its supply. As we have become less and less aware of the natural resources that provide us with sustenance in our largely urban and technological society, so the gap has widened. The transitional phenomena of Western society, like the festivals of spring and harvest, the new year and the ceremonies depending on the seasonal rhythms, have lost much of their significance, even though they have not entirely disappeared. We tend to go through the festive motions in an act of entertainment rather than efficacy. Carl Jung claimed that the malaise of the modern world was due to a lack of mythological thinking, an observation underlined by one of Tolkien's commentators, Randel Helms (1976), who remarks:

Cultural ideals are formulated and understood most efficiently in myths, and we have lost in fact the key to response to our culture's central mythic system (p. 132).

Putting the matter another way, whatever our religious beliefs may be, without myth or a religious mode of thought there is nothing to fill the social gaps. Without fairy tales, an individual lacks the means of externalizing the interior anxieties over such emotional facts of life as separation and loss, two of the major problems anyone ever has to face. The difference between myths and fairy

tales, as Bettelheim notes, is that:

In fairy tales, unlike myths, victory is not over others but only over oneself and over villainy (mainly one's own, which is projected as the hero's antagonist). If we are told anything about the rule of these kings and queens, it is that they ruled wisely and peacefully, and that they lived happily. This is what maturity ought to consist of: that one rules oneself wisely, and as a consequence lives happily (p. 128).

Enough has been said about the function of myth, legend, folk and fairy tale in psychological terms—at least enough, I hope, to prove to the skeptical parent or teacher that the fantasy world of these traditional narratives has much greater significance in the cultural and personal education of the developing child than they had supposed. And this significance is not confined to individuals; it is part of social life. Moreover, many tales have the quite specific function of integrating the personal and the communal, of showing how a young child first comes to terms with, then eventually lives in, society.

Types of Folk and Fairy Tales

Folk tales represent the collective experience of any identifiable group of people with common roots, beliefs and language—the last being, perhaps, the single most important factor, since language defines social cohesion as well as expressing its socio-religious bases.

The folk tale, as we saw earlier, has no known author—unlike the fairy tale which may have been modified from its folk origin as in the collections of the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen. The contemporary tale, which verges on what is really a children's story (like C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* or Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*), is however dealing with the same kind of perennial themes—though it is the product of an individual author and not a community or "folk." It is useful to catalogue some of the common themes:

1. **Tribal History.** These stories are usually "official" in the sense that they are recited on specific occasions, but their historical reliability is dubious. That Arthur of Britain actually lived is seldom in dispute; that he lived in an age of chivalry and possessed a round table is extremely unlikely. Arthur's life has been shifted from Roman times, where he probably led the resistance to the invaders, into the middle ages where he becomes a legendary figure with religious connotations associated with the typical folk tale element of the quest, the tasks and the journey (in this case the search for the Holy Grail). Similarly, the "Wild West" in the United States has its own legendary "heroes," both white and Indian (though whether the West was actually as "wild" as the world is led to believe through the movies is open to considerable doubt). The historical folk tale begins as conversation and ends in legend and literature.

2. **Local History.** These stories could be found in any society and usually refer to particular families or a village. Most families to which we belong have their own "folk tales" of family gatherings and activities. They now form the basis of much work in schools in the form of "demography," the study of local sources which are tapped by talking to senior citizens and the oldest inhabitants of a community. Family histories provide a valuable means of confirming factual history, though the professional historian may cast doubt on the accuracy of the material.

3. **Myth.** Most myths are regarded as having taken place in what the aborigines of Australia call "the dream time," a delightful way of describing the essence of folk and fairy tale summed up in the traditional opening "Once upon a time . . . " Myths, as we noted earlier, deal with the origins of things, the relation between the natural and the supernatural, with explanations in symbolic and not empirical terms. The Garden of Eden is not confined to Western mythology, and some form of a paradisaical state spoiled by the intrusion of a nonsocial being is common throughout the world. That the snake or serpent is frequently chosen as the agent of evil is merely to express a common fear of snakes in general, or "snake phobia" as it is usually known.

4. **Legend.** Aesop's *Fables* deal with natural phenomena. The whole notion of the "fabulous" reappears with great regularity in children's stories like those of A.A. Milne's popular narrative about Pooh Bear and even Paddington, who are destined to become if not mythological at least legendary figures!

5. **Trickster.** The trickster, usually in the guise of an animal, is one of the most common folk tale themes. Its main function seems to be as "social regulator," since the animal represents human faults and failings that are gently and entertainingly condemned. By using animals, the storyteller is effectively distancing the antisocial behaviour from those who are listening or reading the story. One of the most famous collections of "trickster" tales originated in West Africa with *Anansi* the spider, whose cunning tries to outwit the more powerful world around him. The tales have been retold in many forms and are well established in the West Indies. The oral nature of the folk tale is plainly demonstrated in the flexibility of the narrative. Thus, among the Ashanti in Ghana, West Africa, *Anansi* now referees football matches!

Survivals of the folk tale trickster are many and various. For instance, some authorities claim that Brer Rabbit is, in essence, a "trickster" with moral implications. And even in the innocuous, though delightful, Beatrix Potter's *Tale of Mr. Tod,* the wily fox (always one of my favourites) can be interpreted as the archetypal antisocial figure whose cunning must be recognised and controlled. The trickster embodies the darker side of our nature and at the same

time demonstrates that the weak and wily can sometimes overcome the strong and silly. Yet the underlying theme of most trickster type tales is the moral to be drawn about some kind of personal or social behaviour—to learn to share, to be kind, and to give respect where respect is due. As Ruth Finnegan (1970), an authority on African folk lore, comments:

In such narrations the moral element sometimes seems to form the core of the story, so that we could appropriately term it a parable rather than a straightforward story (p. 347).

Sometimes, however, the moral seems an afterthought depending on the storyteller and the audience. In short, it seems unnecessary to differentiate between a parable and a folk tale, since folk and fairy tales implicitly teach a moral. *Aesop's Fables* are obvious examples of the so-called aetiological or explanatory type of tale with moral undertones. Trickster tales expose our selfishness which, whether we admit it or not, exists as a destructive force we only dimly comprehend. Trickster tales, therefore, are therapeutic, both for the individual child and for society as a whole.

6. Entertainment. Finally, there are tales that are essentially "entertainment"—though I believe that every folk and fairy tale combines pleasure with profit and, whilst entertaining, deals in some way with human behaviour and relationships and their instinctive and cultural origins. For example, E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* includes many of the elements already referred to; but the story can also be read as pure, unadulterated entertainment, the mark of the truly effective fairy tale. Without entertainment, children soon become bored.

As the British novelist and critic E.M. Forster once ironically suggested, when Neanderthal man sat round the campfire telling stories, the only merit in them was to want to know what happened next. If no one did, the audience either fell asleep or killed him! The former is likely with children; the latter somewhat unlikely in these days, though we metaphorically "kill" a boring series told on TV by switching it off, and children mentally cut the storyteller "dead" when they say "We've heard it!" The fault lies probably in the storyteller, not the story. We shall deal with some of the tricks of the trade in a moment. For, though the modern teller of tales may use new narrative material, more often than not he or she is retelling an ancient story—and the themes remain constant.

In discussing the versions of the familiar fairy tale of *The Sleeping Beauty,* which appears in various forms in places as far apart as Europe, India and Mexico, P.L. Travers (1975) reiterates the Jungian notion of the collective unconscious:

Perhaps we are born knowing the tales, for our grandmothers and all their ancestral kin continually run about in our blood repeating them endlessly and the shock they give us when we first hear them is not of surprise but of recognition (p. 50).

Travers relates the basic elements of the fairy tale to his own

experience as a child. He refers to the mythological explanation of life in the Three Fates in terms of his great-aunts, one of whom "lived on her capital." To the young Travers, "capital" meant herself—her toes, fingers and other physical organs which she ate secretly in her room and which were miraculously regenerated each day. He writes:

Aunt Jane stealthily nibbling at her liver, was at once her own Prometheus and her own eagle. The myth did not need to be told me. It rose and spoke for itself (p. 49).

This is the secret of the true folk and fairy tale: that it perennially and eternally speaks to those unanswered questions that well up within us and will not let us alone until we have an answer. As children, we may not be ready intellectually to be given the scientific factual solution or explanation; a story, myth, legend, fairy tale, call it what one will, fulfills the need. It fills the gap with "transitional phenomena" that Winnicott claims are the means every child uses to heal the breach between perplexity and understanding, separation and re-integration or, in anthropological terms, to give substance to the rites of passage, the initiation into a new and different status whether it be from birth to infancy, childhood to adolescence, to marriage and ultimately to death. On the road through these phases, many experiences confront the growing child as they do the adult. Folk and fairy tales are, in this sense, offering us the rites of passage in forms of fantasy where, as Tolkien so neatly puts it, we experience and rejoice in "Escape, Recovery and Consolation," which he identifies as three major functions of fairy tales. These are the basic themes of folk and fairy tale, whatever the superficial, culturally determined narrative may be.

Themes of Folk and Fairy Tales

First, as Bettelheim claims, the fairy tale is a means of gaining autonomy from one's parents; so in a story like *The Goose Girl,* and of course in many similar tales, a son or daughter is sent away to establish a life of his or her own. Bettelheim, strongly influenced by Freudian psychology, suggests that this has an oedipal meaning. A child believes that the parent of his or her own sex is a usurper and turns the other parent's affection away from him or herself.

Second, then, the fairy tale guides a child out of this early oedipal stage into the next one. It assumes a rite of passage, an initiatory function that helps a child from one status of emotional, physical and intellectual development to the next. *The Goose Girl* warns us that certain things must be given up if we are to make progress in life and that it is better to accept the role of a child than, as Bettelheim puts it,

. . . to try to take that of a parent, much as one may desire to do so (p. 138).

Folk tales define status and the transitional rites necessary to pass between them. This is part of the process of "Recovery" and "Consolation."

Third, fairy tales underline the important lesson that, however much parents love and care for their children, they cannot assure development to maturity. Eventually we are alone. In *The Goose Girl,* the daughter who is sent away to find a suitor must deal with the tasks on her own. Typically, the structure of the story illustrates the metaphoric as well as the actual journey during which time these tasks have to be overcome. And this brings us to a fourth theme.

Fourth, a child may feel a sense of failure at not being able to live up to a parent's expectations. When an ogre or giant threatens the hero in a story, as for instance in the classic *Jack and the Beanstalk,* a feeling of anxiety is inevitably created in the child. For this reason some parents and teachers are opposed to the fairy tale because it seems to promote this anxious attitude. In practice, the opposite is true. By arousing the anxiety and dealing with it in the story world, we provide a means of "escape," consolation and recovery. A child can identify with the happy ending in which the hero or heroine is ultimately triumphant. Incidentally Bettelheim, whilst giving guarded approval to the well-known story *The Little Engine That Could,* which encourages a child to try hard in order to succeed (quite rightly, in my view), emphasises the fact that this does not necessarily remove a child's inner conflicts and anxieties. A much better example of a modern "fairy tale," which incorporates all the elements so far discussed, is Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are.* The story bears careful analysis, and we shall discuss it in detail later to show how a modern fairy tale can and does fulfill functions similar to those classic folk tales of the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen.

Fifth, there is the enduring theme epitomised in such tales as *The Sleeping Beauty,* the subject of ballet, British pantomime and endless narrative variations. The allegory in this type of tale is the antithesis of that in the heroic theme, and further illustrates the anthropologist's account of initiatory rites. *The Sleeping Beauty* theme deals with the fact that in order to grow up we need to develop the passive as well as active sides of our personality and behaviour, to engage in contemplation of as well as participation in the business of living. We withdraw into the wilderness in order to become men and women. We must have our quiet times as well as our noisy activities. Having gained strength by thinking instead of doing, the child—who is passing from one developmental stage to another, whether from infancy to childhood or childhood to adolescence and so on—discovers the strength of mind and body to cope with the new demands made on him or her. Innocence may be lost, but experience is gained in the "awakening." To quote Bettelheim once more:

> *The Sleeping Beauty tells that a long period of quiescence, of contemplation, of concentration on the self, can and often does lead to highest achievement (p. 226).*

And, especially in this competitive world of hurry and hubbub, this is a lesson learnt hard but nevertheless one that needs learning.

The fairy tale, reaching into the subconscious—where it finds an instinctive response to an unspoken need for confirmation of what a child is feeling and especially feeling guilty about doing apparently nothing—can help the child come to terms with those feelings. Ultimately, this time of quiescence will be turned to advantage as the new information is assimilated into new patterns of behaviour or "schemas" as Piaget calls them. A fairy tale confirms the value of contemplative time.

A sixth theme is that of displacement by the "new arrival." The most obvious example is *Goldilocks and the Three Bears.* "Someone's been sleeping in my bed . . . " is a universal cry of dispossession and will go on echoing down the ages as children of each succeeding generation seek to comprehend what they interpret as a shift in a parent's affections from themselves to the newborn infant. Stories have evolved to deal with this situation and the theme can be detected in *Goldilocks* and *Cinderella,* the latter being described as the most popular of all fairy tales with a worldwide distribution. The name "Cinderella"—or "Cinders" as she is somewhat affectionately known—implies that she has been ousted from her position in the family and has had to be relegated to living among the ashes. Paradoxically, the keeper of the hearth in ancient times was a prestigious occupation. Preserved in folk tales is the notion of tending the sacred fire, of having a "hearth and home" and consequently of living in happy rather than sad times.

The *Cinderella* story combines two apparently contradictory notions in child development: the degradation imagined by a child because he or she feels displaced (but through displacement a step is taken towards independence) and the warmth of feeling aroused because of happy memories spent in the safety and security of the home (focused in the flickering flames of the open fire around which the family gathered for storytelling). And many of us can actually recall the songs or stories literally told at mother's knee by the fireside. But whereas *Goldilocks* stresses the aspect of displacement or usurpation of affection, *Cinderella* manages to effect a compromise. We remember the happiness of childhood and mourn its inevitable loss. Yet something remains and that "some day our prince will come" or "ship come in" is the ultimate confirmation of hope in the achievement of a mature and individual life.

Finally, and perhaps it comes as an anticlimax in describing themes, we note that in *Cinderella* there is the reminder that children like to get dirty! Anal interest is a well-known feature of infants which can be constructively transferred to water and sand play, but it can also be the subject of fairy tales as indeed in the case of *Cinderella* it seems to be. The story reminds us that there is nothing wrong with getting dirty, a point with which children who come from spotless homes sometimes have to contend.

Analysis of a Contemporary Fairy Tale

Maurice Sendak's story *Where the Wild Things Are* draws together most of the threads of theme, structure and purpose of fairy tales we have been discussing. It will help us to summarise the function of fantasy in general by analysing the story very briefly, because it shows how to help children cope with their terrors, anxieties and guilt on the model of the true traditional folk tale.

The story begins: "The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another his mother called him 'Wild Thing,' and Max said: 'I'LL EAT YOU UP,' so he was sent to bed without eating anything." Plainly, this incident is based on the common behaviour of young children who "make mischief" and then receive some form of punishment for it. Hence, they feel guilty because they have apparently lost the love and approval of their parents. Somehow, that love has to be restored; but none of us likes to admit any guilt or responsibility for things that go wrong. We all try to shift the blame onto someone else, so Max wears his wolf suit as a kind of personal disguise. It is a different persona or mask. In effect, everything that occurs in the story is happening not to Max but to the boy pretending to be a wolf.

Sendak bases his structure on a young child's ability to slip easily from fantasy to reality by describing how Max's room grows into a forest and then into an ocean on which he sails "in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are." At first, Max's terrors are externalized in the monsters with their "terrible roars and terrible teeth and terrible eyes and terrible claws." Then Max commands, "Be Still!" and tames them all by staring into their yellow eyes without blinking once and "they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all and made him king of all wild things." The image of the king/hero is, of course, fundamental to folk and fairy tales because the figure symbolises a child's triumph over separation and loneliness in his growing independence.

So Max comes to terms with his fear and returns over the weeks and days of the ocean until he finds himself back in his own room "where he found his supper waiting for him and it was still hot." The allegory is fairly plain: that Max has been forgiven and he will go on being provided with food and love. Thus his terrors (which could be the cause of his mischief in the first place!), his guilt and anxiety have been removed and his mother's love is restored. And, incidentally, Max has discovered in his fantasy world what it is like to frighten as well as to be frightened.

Where the Wild Things Are is one of the classic examples of a modern

fairy tale and, if compared with Michael Bond's *A Bear Called Paddington,* a difference in purpose emerges. Paddington is one more bear in a long line of animal stories that are, in effect, parables rather than myths. And herein lies an essential distinction. Myths deal with deep-seated, subconscious feelings and behavioural problems, whereas the parable is more concerned with the manners and mores of society. Paddington does his best but fails like many children because he lacks the skill and ability to perform the adult tasks adequately. However, he feels no guilt, despite his failures; indeed, his efforts to help are usually condoned not condemned, a point that parents and teachers could well take to their hearts. Our task now is to know why, when and how to tell fairy tales.

Why, When and How To Tell Fairy Tales

The Reason

The one fact that distinguishes human beings from machines is their ability to imagine and fantasize; in short, their capacity for play, whether it is physically active and dramatic or physically passive and imaginative. We can play with ideas as well as things, and this enables us to predict as well as recall happenings of the past. Consequently, we can change the course of events because we can see round mental corners. If we drive on the opposite side of the road from everyone else, we are likely to meet with an accident—not necessarily, if luck is with us, but a child has to learn the possibility.

This peculiarly human characteristic is summed up by Harvey Cox (1969) who writes:

> *Fantasy is uniquely human. A hungry lion may dream about a zebra dinner but only man can mentally invent wholly new ways of living his life as an individual and as a species . . . fantasy is a form of play that extends the frontiers of the future (p. 8).*

So every one of us has had to effect a compromise between what we genetically inherit, our instinctive behaviour on the one hand and what we learn about society and our cultural traditions on the other. The latter modifies the former and vice versa, for instinct and culture, as Konrad Lorenz (1967) has shown, are complementary. From earliest times, humankind has invented stories to bridge the gap, make the compromise, and help to overcome instinctive and often frightening biological drives and psychic feelings.

One day every child must leave the safety of home, family, tribe or social group and make his or her own way in the world. A part of every boy and girl wants to do this; the other part is wary and afraid. Puberty for boys and girls means a change in biological rhythms; how do they cope with new thoughts and feelings about the opposite sex? A story evolves from accumulated experience. "Once upon a time, there was a prince/princess whose father believed it was time for marriage . . . " Or how do children cope with being relegated to the second, third or fourth child in the family, when once they were the only one? Fairy tales have the answer in fantasy. Folk and fairy tales recognise these problems, and children readily respond to the appeal they make to that unconscious repository of past and present experience which is being slowly fashioned into a new personality. The fairy tale is sound therapeutic psychology.

The Time and Place

The time of their telling makes or mars the effectiveness of folk and fairy tales. There is a time when children, like their ancestors of old, gather at the campfire to listen to old tales retold. This actually happens in some parts of the world. "We sit in the moonlight under a palmtree and listen to the stories. Old and young come together when they know a story is being told," said a West Indian girl. The same is true of West Africa where the traditional stories, much embellished with topical material, are not so much told as dramatised, with the audience completing the tale with a moral in proverbial form.

There is much to be gained from telling stories in class, whether it be in a corner, on a carpet or in some area set temporarily aside for the purpose. The American Indian traditional meeting place, the *kiva,* which I have seen in several schools in the U.S.A., is ideal. An artificial hollow in the classroom floor enables the children to sit on different levels and see the storyteller and any illustrative material he or she may have. The *kiva,* carpet or quiet corner defines the area in which we communally listen to what might otherwise be slightly terrifying if we heard it alone. Together we are learning about ourselves and our cultural heritage, why human beings are what they are and do what they do.

The Person

And the place of telling the story is focused not only spatially but also relationally. There is nothing to replace the story told "live," with the lilt and pitch of the storyteller's voice rising and falling to the varied rhythm of the narrative. The animation of the face reflects the incidents in the story, and the teller of tales knows very well what effect the story is having upon the audience. If the story can be told without constant recourse to the text, then so much the

better. But if it must be read, and many stories must be, then we should always be sensitive to the response of the listeners by lifting our eyes and searching the faces for signs that the story is having its effect.

And, of course, traditional stories must be told in exactly the same way each time. Especially is this true with very young children who find security in the predictable structure of the tale. If events happen in threes, as we have seen that they usually do, then they must always happen this way in the story. "The Three Bears" or "The Three Pigs" must come in the same order each time. Disrupting the pattern disturbs the framework of secure fore-knowledge. Finally, the storyteller must be completely involved in the fantasy world, believe in it and share it with the children.

But though stories may be told in a group or class, there is a time and place for parents to tell the "bedtime" story. Folk tales were not designed for individual listening; their potentially frightening and nightmarish effect is offset by group listening. We do not wish children to go to sleep with the possibility of the brain still working over the violence of witches and wizards! There are stories, however, that send us into the land of dreams where the story is relived and even extended so that subconsciously we go on working out the problems and finding satisfaction and pleasure. We wake refreshed because solutions have been found and our speculations confirmed. My mother first read Beatrix Potter's stories to me at bedtime, and they remain vividly in my memory—especially *Peter Rabbit,* who just manages to escape the wrath of Mr. McGregor, but suffers self-inflicted punishment in the form of a stomachache because he went where he was not supposed to go. And *Pigling Bland,* a long story that delayed bedtime, is based on the traditional folk tale theme of the journey (since I was Thursday's child, "I had far to go," just like the pigs!).

The time, the place and the person are all important factors in the telling of folk and fairy tales. Some stories are best told collectively, some individually; but until the distinction between fantasy and reality is clearly differentiated in a child's mind, a process that occurs round the age of 7 or so, it is probably better to provide the security in some form that supports the child imaginatively and emotionally—either in class, a group or a family. For whatever we think about them, fairy tales to children are serious and, if we are honest ourselves, they probably reveal more about the ways of the world than we care to consider. In their search for truth and meaning, children penetrate the mysteries more quickly and honestly than we do. Our ability to share with them the mythic truths implicit in every folk and fairy tale is a measure of our humanity and our success as parent and teacher.

Coda

This brief account of fairy tales is far from exhaustive; we could easily be led by the twisting and tortuous paths of psychoanalysis even deeper into the wood, to use the familiar metaphor of fairy tale settings. What I hope has become clear is that fairy tales are the retold versions of folk tales which, in themselves, preserve the accumulated experience of a culture, of human behaviour that does not seem to change too much over the centuries. We continue to seek for meaning in life, for an understanding of ourselves and of the treatment we mete out to each other. We do not properly understand our world or the way we behave or why. Scientists may have answers that do not satisfy us because they seem to be continually changing; the storyteller has always been ready with an answer of sorts, for the storyteller's truth is one of experience collected over long years of human development and consolidation. The storyteller's trade is one of tradition and innovation, drawing on the past for wisdom and the present for inspiration. Hence the tales, though old, are forever new; each generation of children has to learn or rather relearn the lessons of the past already learnt.

It is a strange process, but one which folk and fairy stories make all that easier—at least they confirm our humanity. "How did it all begin?" we ask, and the scientist produces theories that account for the origin of the universe. But the storyteller has a different (yet who can say less truthful?) approach. "Once upon a time there was a beautiful garden . . . and then . . . " and we are transported into a world of fantasy where animals and children talk to each other, where we recover something of our lost sense of wonder and innocence. And in the process we regain our emotional balance. It is summed up in Tolkien's words (1964) about the consolation of joy in the happy ending:

> *This joy is not essentially escapist nor fugitive. In its fairy tale "other world" setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace never to be counted on to recur; it denies universal final defeat giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world . . . (p. 60).*

We need to make contact with our beginnings, to return to that time before we lost our innocence and became sophisticated and grownup. The process of growing is one of moving from one developmental stage to another through the anthropologist's rites of passage, and it is a long and painful business. There are no short cuts, but folk and fairy tales point the way. They are the products of those unnumbered millions who have trodden that path and whose experiences, both bitter and sweet, have accumulated into the wisdom of the ages. Whenever we tell a fairy tale, we are not merely entertaining children—we are teaching them about life. And even if we do not always recognise what we are doing or what the story really means, children seem to know and, in the depths of their being, will always respond to the storyteller's call.

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Background Books for Teachers and Parents

BETTELHEIM, BRUNO. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales.* New York: Knopf, 1977. Essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the psychology of folk and fairy tales. A close analysis of classics like *Rapunzel* and *Cinderella.*

BRIGGS, KATHERINE. *A Dictionary of Fairies.* New York: Penguin, 1977. A fascinating reference book for explaining the source of characters in fairy tales, such as "changelings" and "dwarfs."

COOK, ELIZABETH. *The Ordinary and the Fabulous.* London and New York: Cambridge, 1976. A useful discussion of the nature of fairy tales and their educative function in the classroom.

HELMS, RANDEL. *Myth, Magic and Meaning in Tolkien's World.* London: Panther, 1976. The author analyses the reasons why Tolkien's books appeal to young and old.

PHILLIPS, ROBERT, editor. *Aspects of Alice.* New York: Penguin, 1974. A psychoanalytic approach to understanding Lewis Carroll's famous "dreamchild."

SALE, ROGER. *Fairy Tales and After; From Snow White to E.B. White.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1978. A critical survey of the nature and function of fairy tales, which may be something of an antidote to Bettelheim.

SINGER, JEROME L. *Daydreaming and Fantasy.* Winchester, MA: Allen and Unwin, 1976. The psychology of fantasy which underlies folk and fairy tales is examined in this classic book.

TOLKIEN, J. R. R. *Tree and Leaf.* London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964. Essential reading for anyone trying to understand and appreciate the function of fairy tales. The author gives a scholarly but very readable critique of folk and fairy tales and then illustrates his points with a story of his own called *Leaf by Niggle.*

TRAVERS, P. L. *About the Sleeping Beauty.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975. A retelling of the well-known story with critical comments.